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(54) **MECHANICALLY ACTUATED THERMAL SWITCH**

(75) Inventors: **Gary D. Grayson**, Huntington Beach, CA (US); **Mark W. Henley**, Topanga, CA (US)

(73) Assignee: **The Boeing Company**, Chicago, IL (US)

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F28F 5/00 (2006.01)
F28D 11/00 (2006.01)

(52) **U.S. Cl.** **165/277**; 165/276; 165/86

(58) **Field of Classification Search** 165/86, 165/276, 277

See application file for complete search history.

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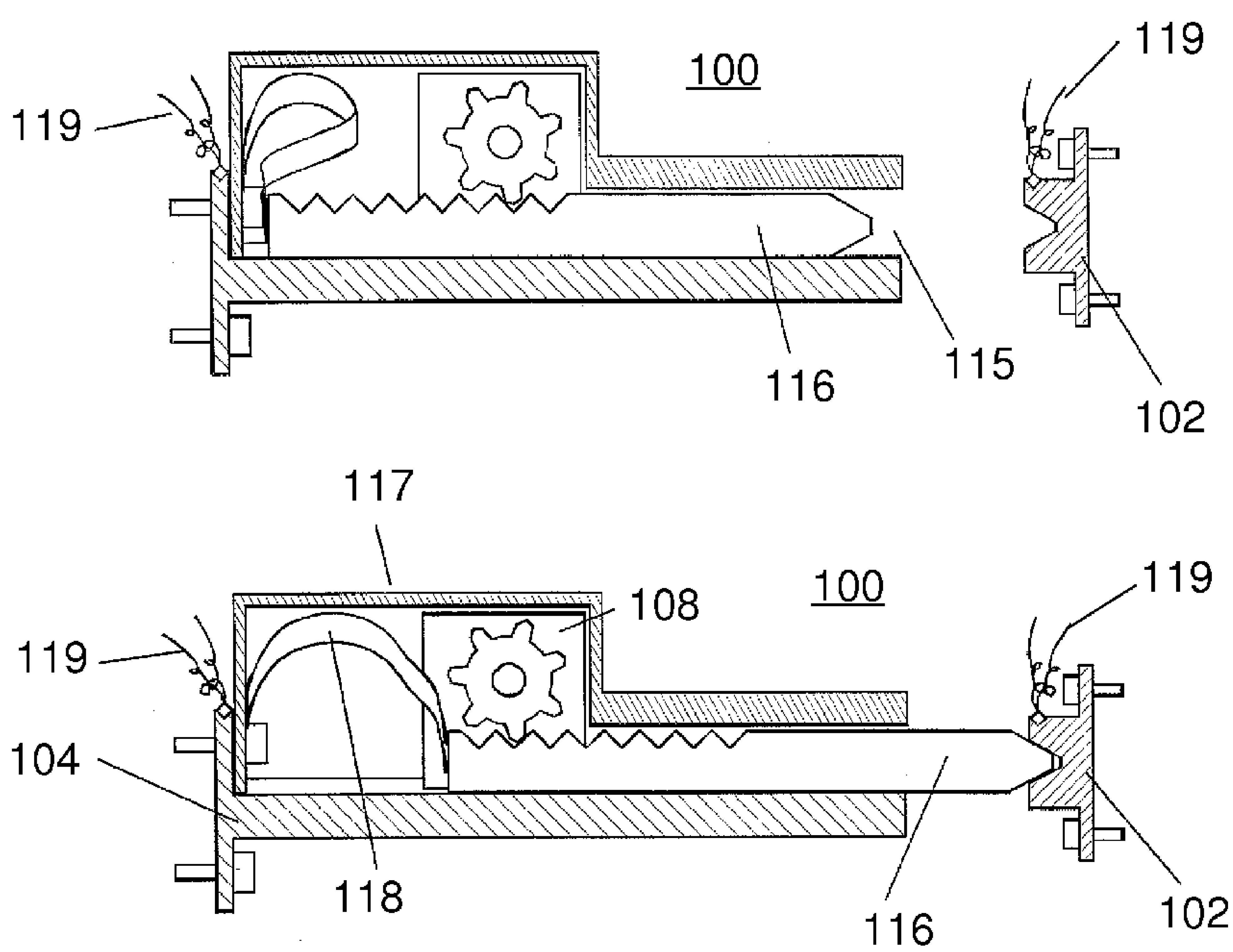
(57) **ABSTRACT**

A method of controlling thermal transfer between a first structure and a second structure includes sending a command signal to a thermal switch and actuating an electric motor in response to receiving the signal. The electric motor may move a first thermally conductive member toward and/or in contact with a second thermally conductive member. The first and second thermally conductive member may be in thermally conductive contact with respective ones of the first and second structure.

14 Claims, 6 Drawing Sheets



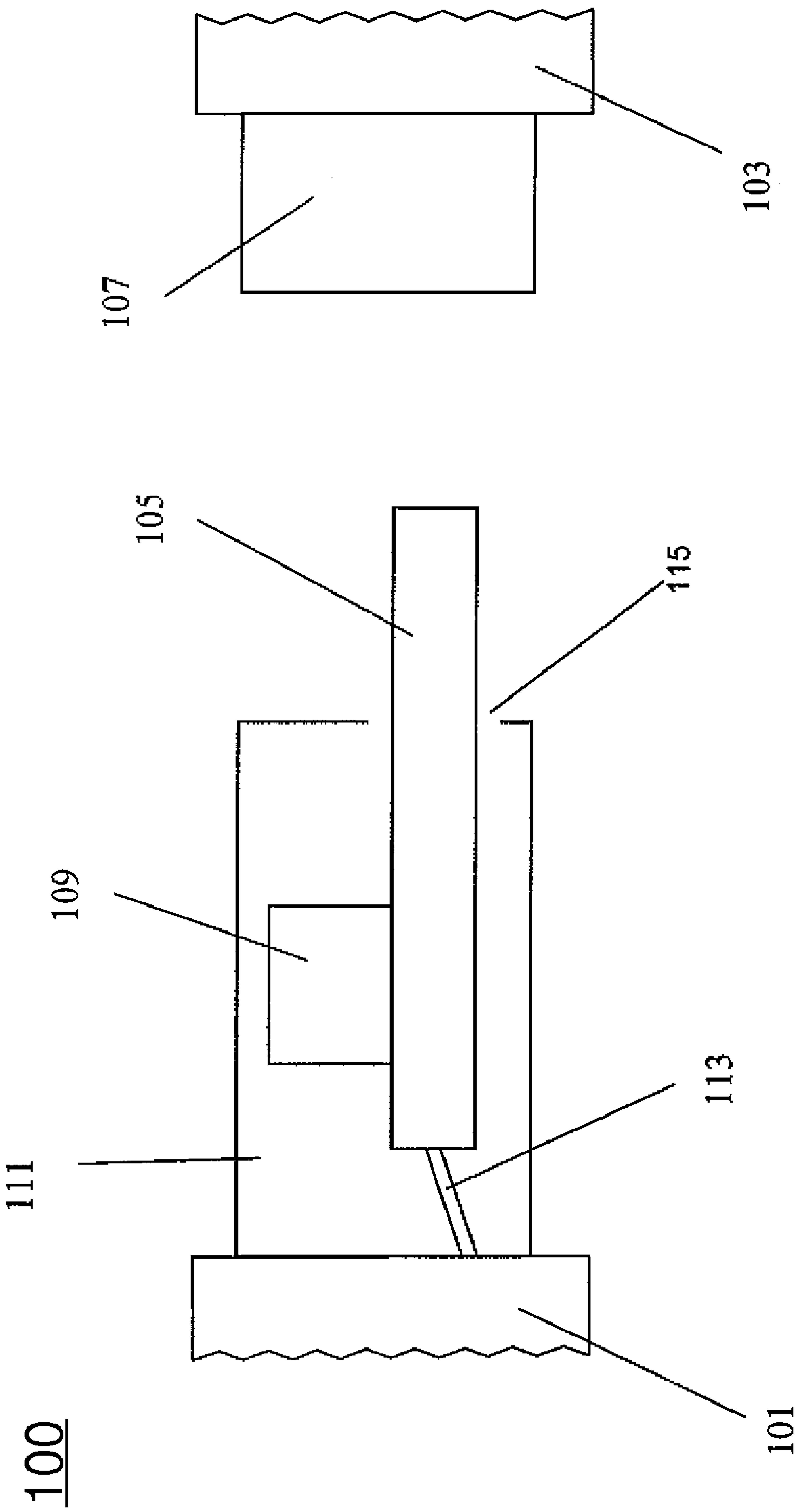


Figure 1

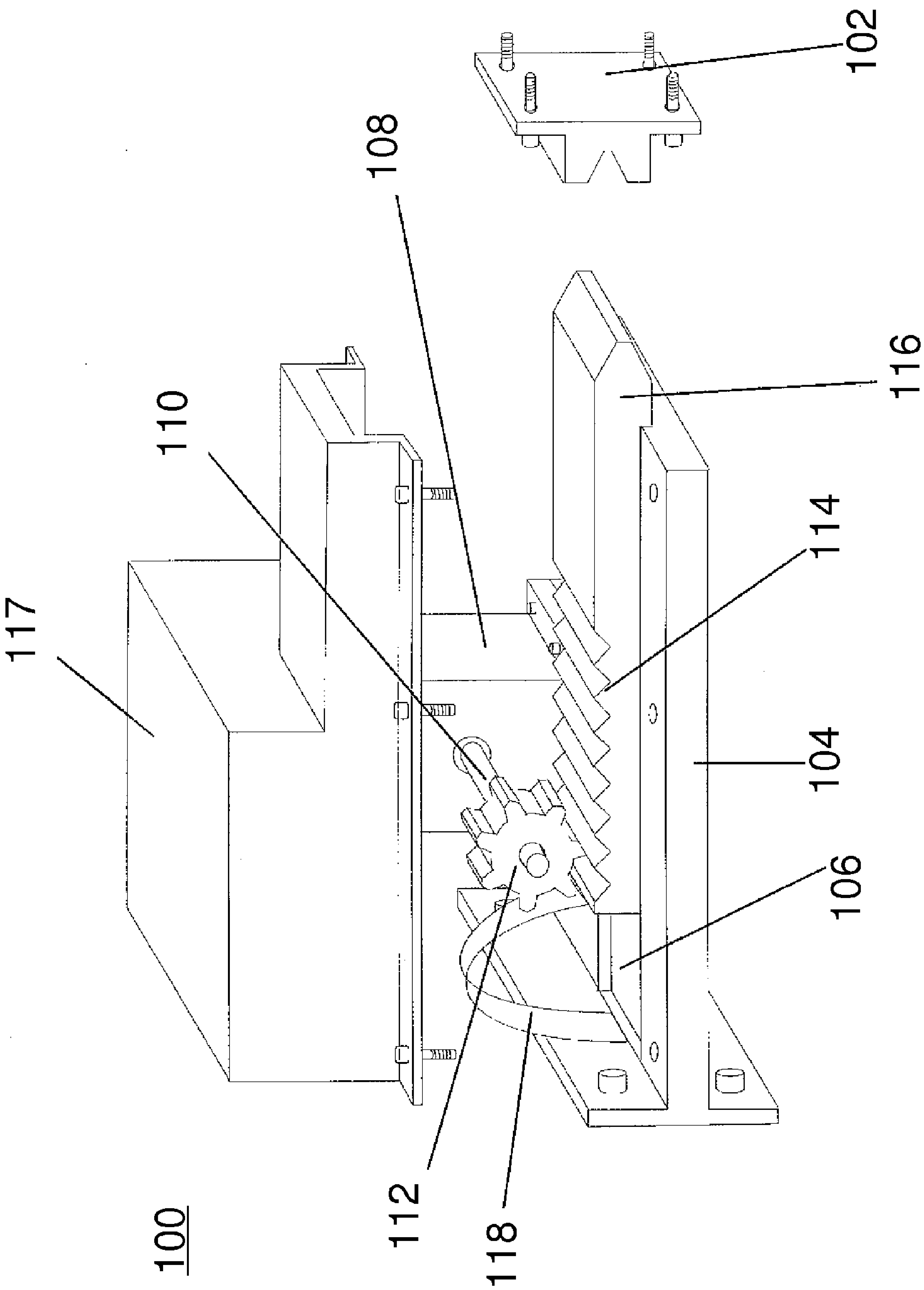


Figure 2

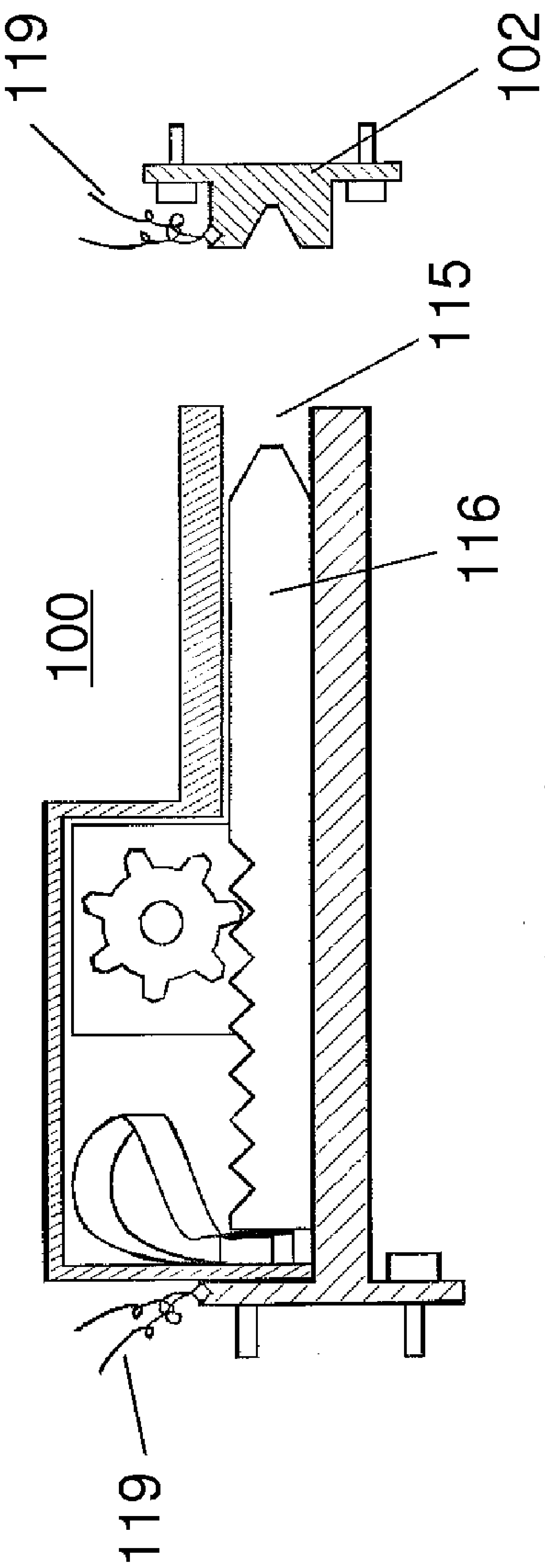


Figure 3A

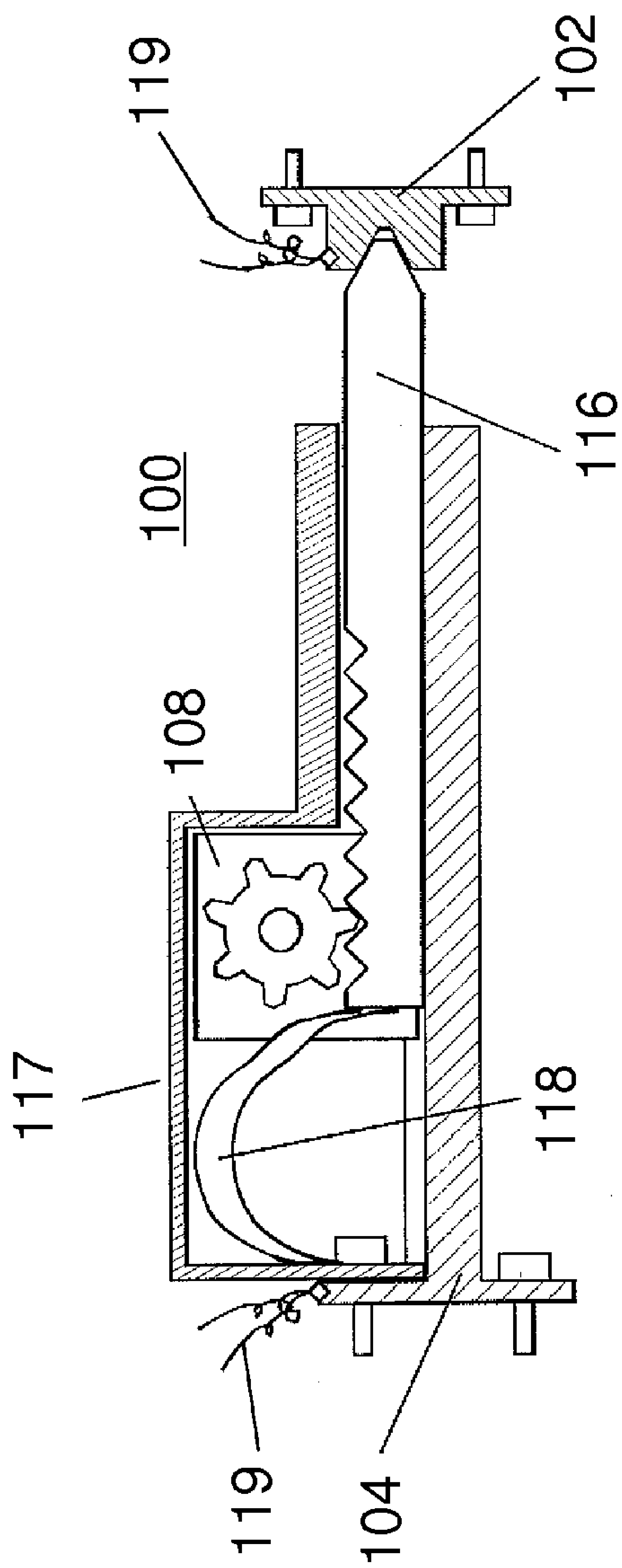


Figure 3B

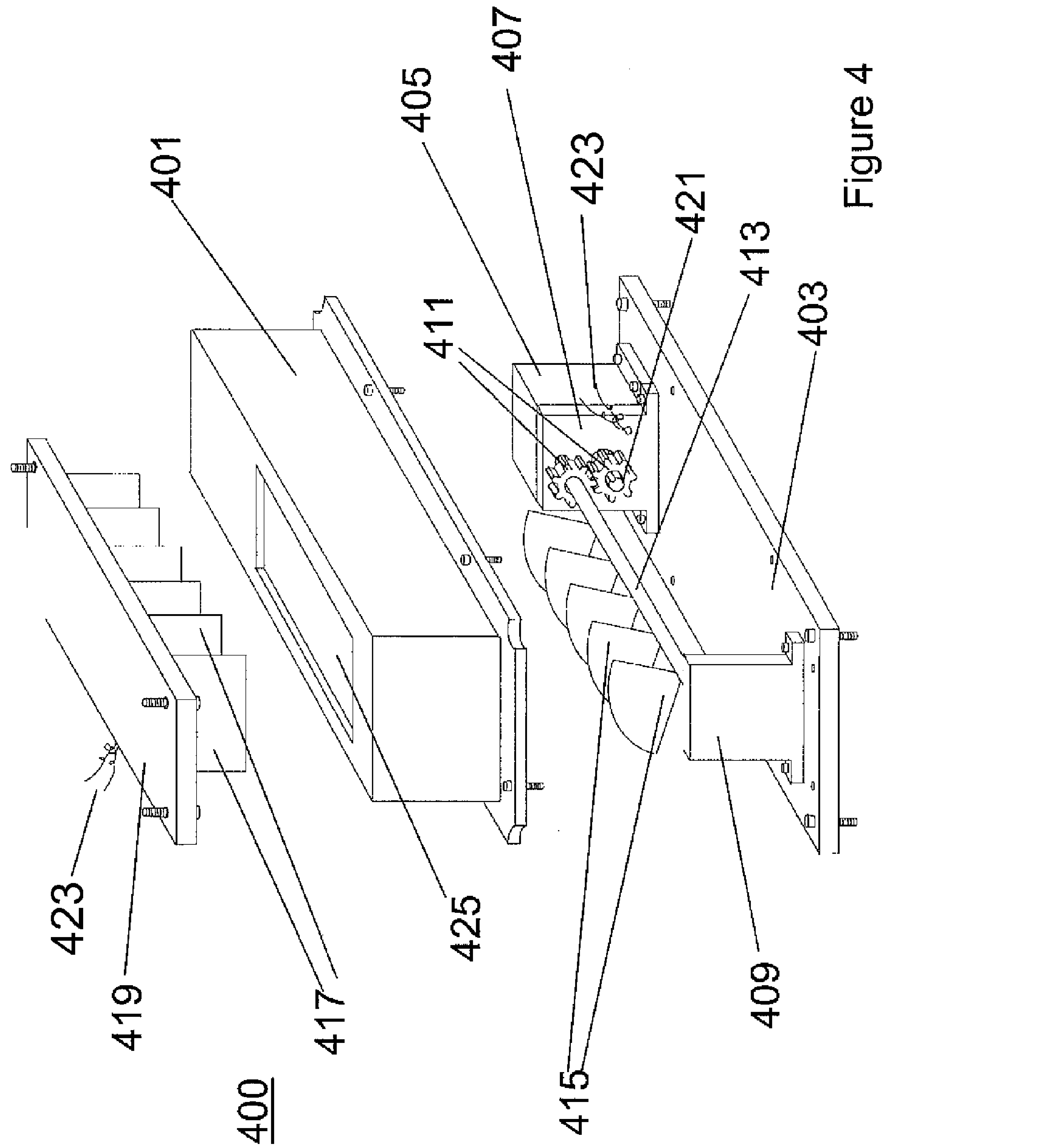


Figure 4

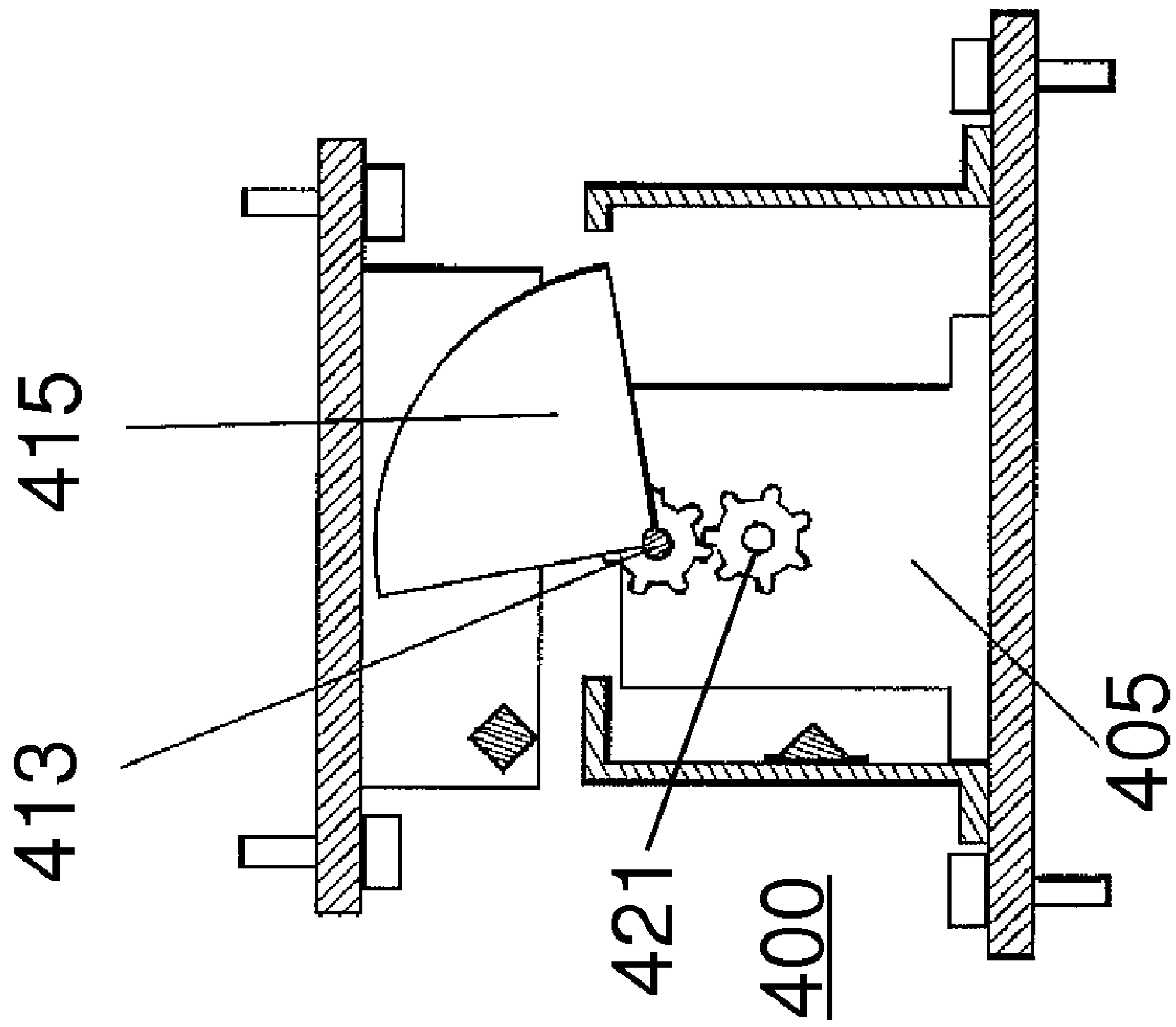


Figure 5B

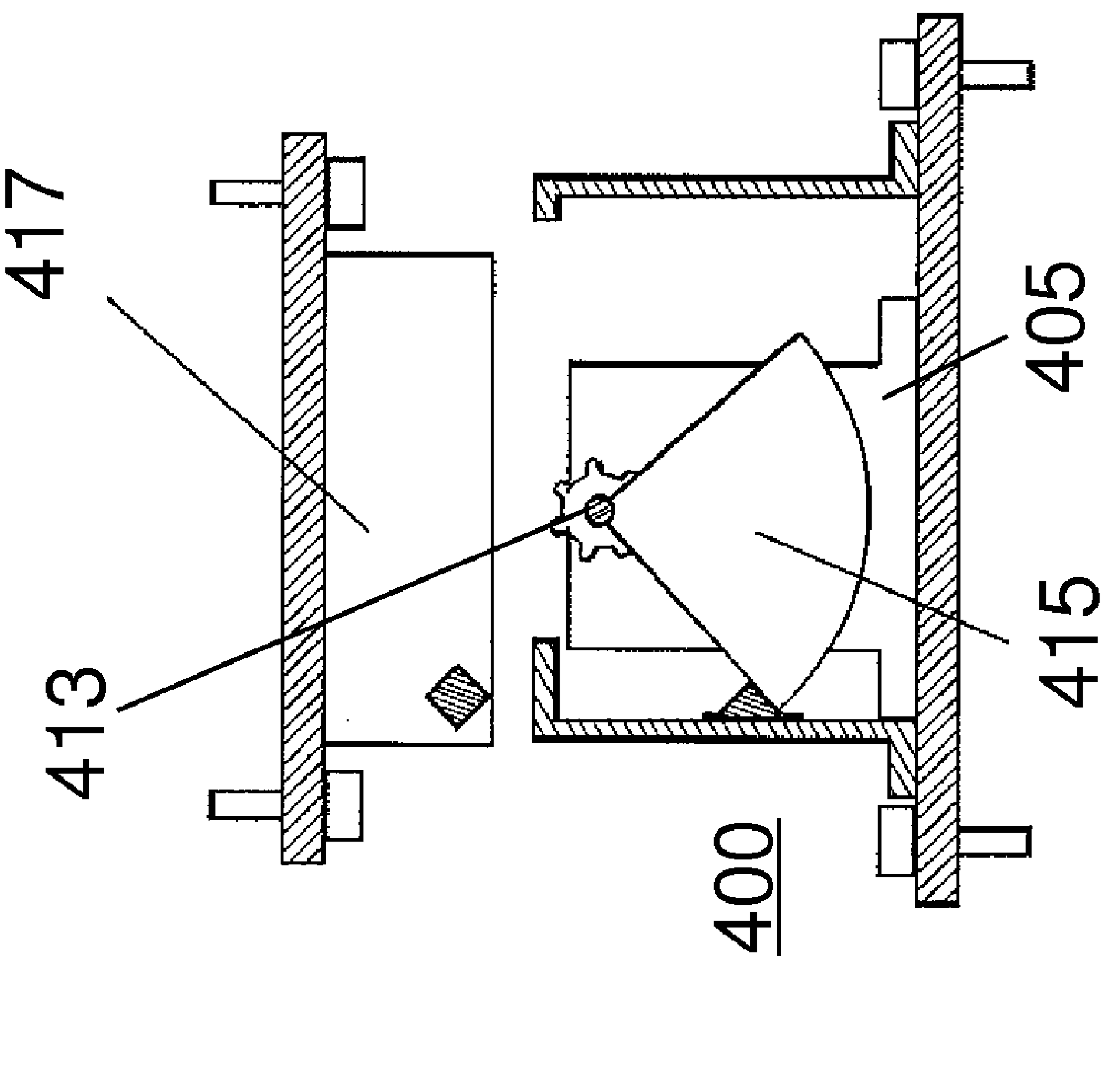


Figure 5A

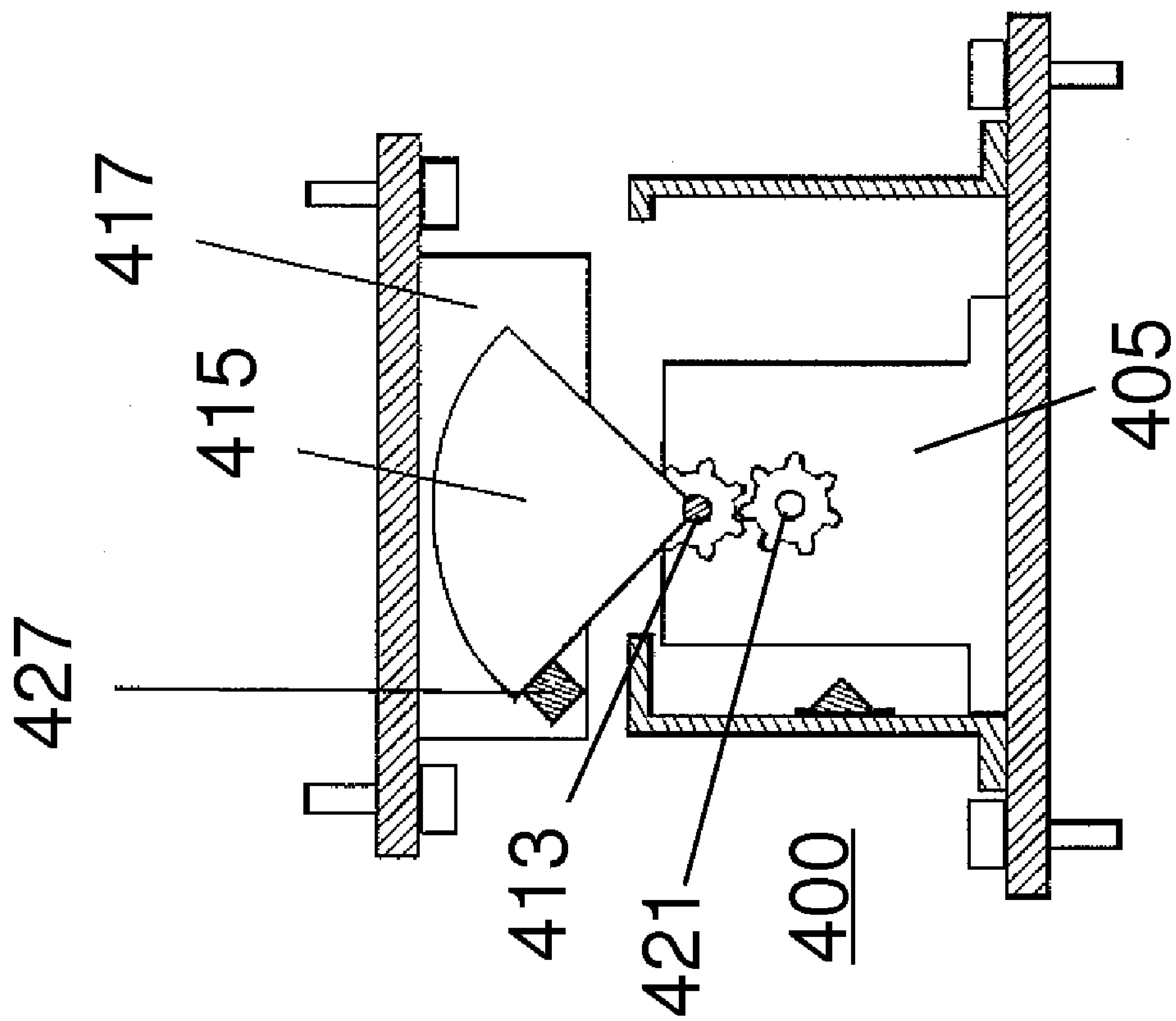


Figure 5C

MECHANICALLY ACTUATED THERMAL SWITCH

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

Embodiments of the disclosure relate to thermal switches, specifically switches for transferring heat and/or tuning the rate of heat transfer between two structures on command.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

There are many thermal switching means to transfer heat between structures, such as in cryogenic refrigeration systems, also known as cryocoolers. These means are passive and operate by isolating the cryocooler and associated hardware from outside heat leaks. These devices depend on principles of thermal expansion of materials to create or tear down a thermally conductive path between structures. Thus, when a desired temperature is reached, a conductive material either expands or contracts thereby connecting or isolating a structure to be cooled or heated. A significant limitation of these thermal switches is that they can not initiate thermal transfer on command or be tuned to control the rate of thermal transfer. For a system in which the desired thermal transfer between structures in the system is not known when the system is designed or manufactured, these types of thermal switching means will not work. Also, because these thermal switches can not be commanded to initiate or suspend thermal transfer, or be dynamically tuned to alter the rate of thermal transfer, these switches will not work in an environment or system where the thermal transfer or flow requirements between elements may change over time.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

Embodiments of the present invention solve the problem of initiating and/or varying heat transfer between two structures on command. In a Thermally-Integrated Fluid Storage and Pressurization System, heat may need to be moved advantageously between cryogenic liquid tanks, supercritical fluids bottles, rocket engines, spacecraft structures, and other devices. These components may be physically separated and require heat to be transferred in an efficient manner. Also, the desired thermal transfer characteristics may change depending on the operation of the system. For example, it may be necessary or advantageous to raise the temperature of a structure at one time to a first temperature, and to lower the temperature of the same structure at another time to a second temperature either higher or lower than the first temperature. Alternatively, it may be necessary and/or advantageous to transfer heat between the structures rather than separately cooling one structure and heating another to allow the system to be more energy efficient. Thus, embodiments of the present invention can be practiced to initiate thermal transfer on command and/or tune the rate of heat transfer between two structures.

Various embodiments of the present invention may involve methods of causing, in response to a signal, a first one or more thermally conductive members in thermal-conductive contact with a first structure to be placed within sufficient proximity to one or more thermally conductive members in thermal-conductive contact with a second structure. Thus, thermal transfer may be advantageously commanded.

In various embodiments, methods may include moving the first one or more thermally conductive members to be placed within a sufficient proximity to the second one or more members to facilitate a selected radiative thermal transfer rate

between the first and second structures via the first and second one or more thermally conductive members. Radiative thermal transfer may be slower than other forms of thermal transfer such as, for example, conductive thermal transfer. Therefore, depending on a desired rate of thermal conductivity, radiative thermal transfer may be advantageous.

In various embodiments, the positioning of the first one or more thermally conductive members may cause the first one or more members to make physical contact with either the second one or more thermally conductive members or a third one or more thermally conductive members attached to the second structure thereby facilitating a thermally conductive transfer between the first and second structures. Conductive thermal transfer may be faster than, for example, radiative thermal transfer. Therefore, depending on a desired rate of thermal conductivity, conductive thermal transfer may be advantageous.

In various embodiments, adjusting the position of the first one or more members may advantageously increase or decrease a selected rate of radiative thermal transfer between the first and second structures.

In various embodiments, the adjacent positioning of the first and second one or more thermally conductive members may cause a portion of the surface area of the first one or more members to make physical contact with the second one or more members and advantageously open a thermally conductive path between the first and second structures.

In various embodiments, the thermally conductive members may be translating plates and a gear-driven electric motor of the thermal switch may translate a rotational motive force into a linear motion of the translating plates by acting on a plurality of gear teeth of the translating plates.

In various embodiments, the first one or more thermally conductive members may be rotating plates operatively coupled to a gear-driven electric motor of the thermal switch, and the electric motor may advantageously cause the plates to rotate.

In various embodiments, the second one or more members may be fixed plates, and adjusting the angle of the rotating plates to a selected angle may advantageously achieve the selected rate of thermal transfer by varying the surface area of the rotating plates that are in proximity to the fixed plates. The rate of radiative thermal transfer may be directly correlated to this surface area.

Embodiments of the invention may be a thermal switch for transferring thermal energy between a first and a second structure having a casing with a travel slot and an opening aligned with the travel slot. A thermally conductive member may be disposed at least partially within the travel slot and an actuator may provide a motive force to the thermally conductive member to move the thermally conductive member along the travel slot and extend the thermally conductive member a pre-determined length out of the opening of the casing, thus facilitating thermal transfer when the thermally conductive member is thermally conductively connected to a first structure and it is placed within proximity to a second structure.

In various embodiments, the thermally conductive member may be a translating plate having an end section adapted to fit into, and make physical contact with, a corresponding section of a contact plate attached to the second structure. Thus, the surface area of the thermally conductive member that forms the conductive path may be increased. Also, small alignment issues of the thermally conductive member may be advantageously resolved by providing a corresponding section for the member to slide into.

In various embodiments, the actuator is a gear-driven electric motor and the translating plate further may have a plurality of gear teeth adapted to fit a corresponding plurality of teeth of the gear-driven electric motor and a rotational motive force of the electric motor may be translated into a linear motion of the translating plate by an action of the plurality of teeth of the motor against the plurality of gear teeth.

In various embodiments, an electric solenoid actuator may provide a motive force for the thermally conductive member.

In various embodiments, the thermally conductive member may be coupled to the casing of the switch via a thermally conductive and flexible ribbon or wire thereby advantageously facilitating a thermal conduction path between the first and second structure when the thermally conductive member is extended and in contact with the contact plate.

Various embodiments of the present invention may include thermal switches for transferring thermal energy between a first and a second structure with a cover comprising an opening. The switch may be adapted to be attached to the first structure and an actuator may be disposed within the cover. In embodiments, at least one thermally conductive rotating member may be operatively coupled to the actuator, and may be rotatable by the actuator to a selected one of a plurality of angles such that, when rotated to a selected angle, it may be rotated out of the casing and positioned proximate to at least one thermally conductive fixed member that may be thermal-conductively coupled to the second structure thereby advantageously facilitating a radiative thermal transfer between the first and second structures.

In various embodiments, the actuator may be operated to rotate the rotating member to the selected one of a plurality of angles in order to advantageously control the rate of radiative thermal transfer.

In various embodiments, the rotating plate(s) may be further adapted to be rotatable so that it contacts a thermally conductive stop attached to the second structure, thereby advantageously facilitating a conductive thermal transfer between the first and second structures in addition to the radiative thermal transfer.

In various embodiments, switches may be adapted for use in zero gravity conditions and in vacuum and/or near-vacuum conditions. Thus, embodiments of the invention may be advantageously used in man-made orbiting spacecraft.

The features, functions, and advantages can be achieved independently in various embodiments of the present inventions or may be combined in yet other embodiments.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

Embodiments of the disclosure will be readily understood by the following detailed description in conjunction with the accompanying drawings. Embodiments of the disclosure are illustrated by way of example and not by way of limitation in the figures of the accompanying drawings.

FIG. **1** depicts a block diagram of a thermal switch device for transferring thermal energy between two structures in accordance with various embodiments of the present invention.

FIG. **2** depicts an exploded view of a thermal switch utilizing a translating plate in accordance with various embodiments.

FIGS. **3**A and **3**B depict side views of a thermal switch utilizing a translating plate with gear teeth in an open position for little or no heat transfer and a closed position for high conductive heat transfer, respectively.

FIG. **4** depicts an exploded view of a thermal switch utilizing rotating plates for providing either conductive or radiative thermal transfer.

FIGS. **5**A, **5**B, and **5**C depict side views of a thermal switch utilizing rotating plates in an open position with little or no heat transfer, a partially rotated position for a variable radiative heat transfer, and a closed position for conductive heat transfer, respectively.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

In the following detailed description, reference is made to the accompanying drawings which form a part hereof and in which is shown, by way of illustration, embodiments of the disclosure. It is to be understood that other embodiments may be utilized and structural or logical changes may be made without departing from the scope of the disclosure. Therefore, the following detailed description is not to be taken in a limiting sense, and the scope of embodiments in accordance with the disclosure is defined by the appended claims and their equivalents.

Various operations may be described as multiple discrete operations in turn, in a manner that may be helpful in understanding various embodiments; however, the order of description should not be construed to imply that these operations are order dependent.

The description may use perspective-based descriptions such as up/down, back/front, and top/bottom. Such descriptions are merely used to facilitate the discussion and are not intended to restrict the application of the embodiments.

The terms "coupled" and "connected," along with their derivatives, may be used. It should be understood that these terms are not intended as synonyms for each other. Rather, in particular embodiments, "connected" may be used to indicate that two or more elements are in direct physical or electrical contact with each other. "Coupled" may mean that two or more elements are in direct physical or electrical contact. However, "coupled" may also mean that two or more elements are not in direct contact with each other, but yet still cooperate or interact with each other.

For the purposes of the description, a phrase in the form "A/B" means A or B. For the purposes of the description, a phrase in the form "A and/or B" means "(A), (B), or (A and B)." For the purposes of the description, a phrase in the form "at least one of A, B, and C" means "(A), (B), (C), (A and B), (A and C), (B and C), or (A, B and C)." For the purposes of the description, a phrase in the form "(A)B" means "(B) or (AB)," that is, A is an optional element.

The description may use the phrases, "various embodiments," "in an embodiment," or "in embodiments," which may each refer to one or more of the same or different embodiments. Furthermore, the terms "comprising," "including,""having," and the like, as used with respect to embodiments as described in the present disclosure, are synonymous.

FIG. **1** depicts a block diagram of a thermal switch **100** for transferring heat between first structure **101** and second structure **103** in accordance with various embodiments. First thermally conductive member **105** may be thermally coupled to first structure **101** through, for example, flexible conductive element **113**. Second thermally conductive member **107** may be coupled or connected to second structure **103**. An actuator **109** disposed within housing **111** may be adapted to move first thermally conductive member **105** towards second thermally conductive member **107** through opening **115**. In embodiments, first thermally conductive member **105** may be adapted to be positioned adjacent to, but not in physical contact with, second thermally conductive member **107**. In that case, the thermal switch of FIG. **1** may facilitate a radiative thermal transfer between first structure **101** and second structure **103**.

In other embodiments, first thermally conductive member **105** may be positioned such that it physically contacts second thermally conductive member **107** facilitating a conductive thermal transfer between first structure **101** and second structure **103**.

In embodiments, first and second thermally conductive members **105** and **107** may be a translating plate and an opposing contact plate, respectively. In embodiments, a translating plate may have a shaped feature at its distal end that fits into a corresponding shaped feature of a contact element which may, in embodiments, correct any misalignment of the travel path of the translating plate and increase the surface area of contact between the two plates to increase conductive thermal transfer. Such shaped features may be, for example, a wedge or other shape. In embodiments, actuator **109** may provide linear motion to first thermally conductive member **105**. In embodiments, first and second thermally conductive members **105** and **107** may be a rotating plate and a fixed plate, respectively. In those embodiments, actuator **109** may act to rotate the rotating plate to place it into a position adjacent to the fixed plates to facilitate radiative thermal transfer. In embodiments, a linear translating plate may be used to facilitate radiative thermal transfer.

In embodiments, actuator **109** may be a gear-driven electric motor or a solenoid actuator or other actuators known in the art. In embodiments, gears of a gear-driven electric motor may be made of materials that have low thermal transfer characteristics thereby minimizing thermal transfer between thermally conductive member **105** and actuator **109**. In embodiments, actuator **109** may generate rotational motion. In embodiments, actuator **109** may generate rotational motion which may be translated into linear motion of first thermally conductive member **105**. In embodiments, conductive element **113** may be a flexible and thermally conductive wire, ribbon, or other implement. In embodiments, the various conductive elements may be composed of materials suitable for thermal conduction and/or radiation such as, for example, metallic materials known in the art and/or composite materials, as well as other suitable thermally conductive materials. One of ordinary skill in the art will recognize that embodiments of the present invention are not limited to any particular material or materials.

FIG. **2** depicts an exploded view of thermal switch **100** utilizing a translating plate **116** in accordance with various embodiments of the present invention. Translating plate **116** may be adapted to move within travel slot **106** of base plate **104**. Also, conductive ribbon **118** may assist translating plate **116** in maintaining thermally conductive contact with the thermal switch **100**. In embodiments, conductive ribbon **118** may be replaced with a conductive wire. Base plate **104** may be in contact with a first structure (not shown). In this way, thermal switch **100** may be in thermally conductive contact with the first structure. In other embodiments, thermal switch **100** may utilize a conductive ribbon or wire to make contact with the first structure. In still other embodiments, thermal switch **100** may be adjacent to the first structure with features (not shown) adapted to radiate heat to and from the first structure.

Electric motor **108** may comprise drive shaft **110** connected to gear **112**. Rotational motion generated by electric motor **108** may be translated into linear motion of translating plate **116** by the motion of gear **112** acting on the plurality of gear teeth **114** of translating plate **116**. Translating plate **116** may then be moved along travel slot **106** and into contact with contact plate **102** attached to a second structure (not shown), thus facilitating a thermal conduction path between the first structure and second structure when translating plate **116** has been moved into contact with contact plate **102**. An end region of translating plate **116** may be adapted to fit into a correspondingly shaped region of contact plate **102** to facilitate the alignment of translating plate **116** with contact plate **102** and to increase the total surface area of translating plate **116** that contacts contact plate **102** thereby increasing the rate of thermal transfer. As shown in FIG. **2**, the end region of translating plate **116** may be wedge-shaped, but one of ordinary skill in the art would appreciate that other shapes may also be used. Cover **117** may be disposed on top of base plate **104** and cover the various components of thermal switch **100**. In embodiments, gear **112** and drive shaft **110** may be made of materials with low thermal conductivity properties to minimize heat transfer to electric motor **108**. Electric motor **108** may be selected to operate in the expected temperature conditions. In embodiments, thermal switch **100** may be adapted to operate in both vacuum conditions and atmospheric conditions.

FIGS. **3**A and **3**B depict a side view of thermal switch **100** in accordance with various embodiments. FIG. **3**A depicts thermal switch **100** in an open position with translating plate **116** completely retracted inside thermal switch **100**. In this position, there may be little or no heat transfer between a first structure (not shown) attached to thermal switch **100** and a second structure (not shown) attached to contact plate **102**. In the vacuum conditions of space, only radiative thermal transfer may occur between translating plate **116** and contact plate **102** which may be minimal in the configuration shown. In embodiments, a hinged flap or other cover (not shown) may be placed over opening **115** that may open when translating plate **116** moves through opening **115**. In embodiments, the flap may be made of material with low thermal conductivity, thereby minimizing the radiative heat loss out of opening **115**. A radiative thermal transfer rate of the open system shown in FIG. **3**A may, in any event, be much smaller than the conductive thermal transfer rate achieved when thermal switch **100** is in the closed position (shown in FIG. **3**B). In an atmospheric environment, a convective heat transfer rate between translating plate **116** and contact plate **102** may occur which may be greater than the radiative heat transfer rate that may occur in vacuum-like conditions.

Also shown are temperature sensors **119** which may facilitate monitoring and operation of thermal switch **100**.

FIG. **3**B depicts thermal switch **100** in a closed position with translating plate **116** having been moved into contact with contact plate **102**. Motor **108** may be energized on command to move translating plate **116** down a travel slot (not shown). Thus, a thermally conductive path may be created between the first and second structure (not shown). Heat may flow to or from the first structure into thermal switch **100**, to translating plate **116** via conductive ribbon **118** and, in some embodiments, base plate **104**. Heat may then flow to or from translating plate **116** into contact plate **102** as the two are now in thermal conductive contact. From there, heat may flow into or out of the second structure. In embodiments, the wedge-shaped end of translating plate **116** may not be as deep as the corresponding wedge-shaped feature of contact plate **102**. In this way, the contact area of translating plate **116** may contact the contact area of contact plate **102** before reaching the end of its range of motion. In embodiments, this may ensure sufficient contact area to facilitate thermal conduction. When heat transfer is no longer desired, motor **108** may be adapted to be energized and spun in reverse causing translating plate **116** to travel back down the travel slot and be fully retracted inside thermal switch **100**.

In embodiments, closed loop motor control using sensors (not shown) or other instruments may be optionally included to turn off motor **108** once thermal switch **100** is fully open or fully closed. Alternatively, an open-loop timed approach may be used to control motor input power. Also, a latching mechanism may be added to prevent motor **108** from moving once power is removed.

FIG. **4** depicts an exploded view of tunable thermal switch **400** in accordance with various embodiments. Cover **401** may be attached to base plate **403** when thermal switch **400** is constructed. Active base plate **403** may have attached to it electric motor **405**, inner shaft support **407**, outer shaft support **409** as well as other components. Connected to electric motor **405** may be drive shaft **421**. Gears **411** may be adapted to translate rotational motion of electric motor **405** to axle **413** which may be attached to a plurality of parallel rotating plates **415**.

Rotating plates **415** may be adapted to be rotated through cover opening **425** and into the gaps in between the plurality of parallel fixed plates **417** thus interleaving rotating plates **415** with fixed plates **417** without making contact. This may allow radiative thermal transfer between rotating plates **415** and fixed plates **417**. The resistance to thermal transfer between the two sets of plates, and thus the rate of radiative thermal transfer between them, may depend on the radiative view factor achieved by the angle of rotation of rotating plates **415**. The radiative view factor may depend, among other things, on the surface area of each of rotating plates **415** that has been rotated into the gaps between fixed plates **417**. This surface area is determined by the angle of rotation of rotating plates **415**. Thus, by varying the angle of rotation of rotating plates **415**, and thereby varying the surface area of rotating plates **415** that are within the gaps between fixed plates **417**, the rate of thermal transfer between rotating plates **415** and fixed plates **417** may be selected by an operator of thermal switch **400**.

In embodiments, active base plate **403** may be adapted to be attached to a first structure (not shown) in a way as to provide for conductive heat transfer between the first structure and thermal switch **400**. Also, fixed plates **417** may be adapted to be attached to passive base plate **419** which may be adapted to be attached to a second structure (not shown). In this way, conductive thermal transfer between the second structure and fixed plates **417** may occur. Thus, when rotating plates **415** are rotated and interleaved with fixed plates **417**, the radiative thermal transfer between them may open a thermal transfer path between the first and second structures. Also, in embodiments, varying the angle of rotation of rotating plates **415**, and thus the radiative view factor, a desired rate of thermal transfer between the first and second structures may be achieved.

Additionally, rotating plates **415** may be adapted to be rotated to a maximum angle and contact a thermally conductive stop (not shown) attached to passive base plate **419**. Thus, depending on the angle of rotation of rotating plates **415**, thermal conduction may be facilitated in addition to the radiative thermal transfer.

In embodiments, active base plate **403**, passive base plate **419**, rotating plates **415**, fixed plates **417**, axle **413**, conductive stop block (not shown), outer shaft support **409**, and inner shaft support **407** may be made from materials with high thermal conductivity characteristics. These materials may be metallic or any high conductivity material. In embodiments, cover **401**, drive shaft **421**, and gears **411** may be made of low conductivity materials to minimize thermal transfer to electric motor **405**. Parallel rotating plates **415** may be welded to axle **413** to maximize conductive heat transfer between rotating plates **415** and axle **415**, outer shaft support **409**, and inner shaft support **407**.

In embodiments, rotating plates **415** may be quarter circle shape, as shown in FIG. **4**, which may allow them to be fully retracted into cover **401**. One of ordinary skill will recognize that rotating plates **415** may be other shapes including circular segments that are more or less than a quarter circle. In embodiments, there may only be one rotating plate and one fixed plate. In embodiments, there may be one rotating plate and two fixed plates. In embodiments there may be two rotating plates and one fixed plate. In embodiments, there may be a plurality of both rotating plates **415** and fixed plates **417** as shown in FIG. **4**. One of ordinary skill in the art will recognize that any number of plates of both types may be selected based on the desired operating characteristics of thermal switch **400**. In alternative embodiments of the present invention, one or more translating plates, rather than rotating plates, may be moved into an interleaved fashion with one or more base plates. In these embodiments, the degree of overlap between the two sets of plates may allow the rate of radiative thermal transfer to be tunable.

In embodiments, fixed plates **417** may be welded to passive plate **419** to maximize thermal transfer. Fixed plates **417** may be, as shown in FIG. **4**, rectangular with a 2:1 length-to-width ratio; however, other shapes and/or ratios may be selected as desired. Fasteners may be used to attach active base plate **403** and passive base plate **419** to structures as desired to promote conductive thermal transfer. Also, two temperature sensors **423** may be included to monitor temperature. In embodiments, more than two temperature sensors may be included to improve or alter the monitoring capabilities. In embodiments, one or no temperature sensors may be included.

In embodiments, closed loop motor control using limit sensors (not shown) or other instruments may be used to turn motor **405** off once thermal switch **400** is fully open or fully closed. In alternative embodiments, an open loop timed approach may be used to control motor input power. In embodiments, a latching mechanism (not shown) may be used to prevent motor **405** from moving once power is removed.

FIGS. **5**A-C depict a side view of tunable thermal switch **400** in accordance with various embodiments. FIG. **5**A shows thermal switch **400** in an open position with little or no heat transfer. Rotating plate **415** is shown rotated as far away as possible from fixed plate **417**. In this position, radiative thermal transfer rate is minimized. FIG. **5**B shows tunable thermal switch **400** in a position with a moderate radiative thermal transfer rate. The angle of rotating plate **415** may be adjusted by energizing electric motor **405** and rotating drive shaft **421** to the desired angle. Therefore, the angle of rotation of rotating plate **415** may be adjusted to tune thermal switch **400** to a desired level of radiative thermal transfer by increasing or decreasing the radiative view factor as discussed above. In this way, the overall thermal transfer rate may between the first and second structures (not shown) may be tuned by an operator of thermal switch **400**.

FIG. **5**C depicts thermal switch **400** in a closed position with conductive and radiative thermal transfer. Here, rotating plate **415** has been rotated to a maximum angle thereby maximizing the radiative view factor between rotating plate **415** and fixed plate **417**. Also, rotating plate **415** may be adapted to contact conductive stop block **427** in order to facilitate conductive heat transfer which may, in embodiments, be a greater rate of thermal transfer than radiative heat transfer. Thus, tunable switch **400** may be tuned to a maximum rate of thermal transfer.

In embodiments, radiative heat transfer may perform best in the vacuum conditions of space as there is negligible gas present to permit convection between rotating plates **415** and fixed plates **417**. When thermal switch **400** is used in these conditions, a greater difference in heat transfer characteristics may be observed between the open and closed positions compared with the same switch used in atmospheric environments.

Thus, tunable thermal switch **400** may provide, in accordance with various embodiments, a variable resistance to heat transfer that may be tuned to achieve a desired radiative thermal transfer rate and be adapted to be activated on command. Also, tunable switch **400** may be activated, according to some embodiments, to achieve conductive thermal transfer.

Although certain embodiments have been illustrated and described herein for purposes of description of the preferred embodiment, it will be appreciated by those of ordinary skill in the art that a wide variety of alternate and/or equivalent embodiments or implementations calculated to achieve the same purposes may be substituted for the embodiments shown and described without departing from the scope of the disclosure. Those with skill in the art will readily appreciate that embodiments in accordance with the present disclosure may be implemented in a very wide variety of ways. This application is intended to cover any adaptations or variations of the embodiments discussed herein. Therefore, it is manifestly intended that embodiments in accordance with the present disclosure be limited only by the claims and the equivalents thereof.

The invention claimed is:

1. A method of controlling thermal transfer between a first structure and a second structure positioned a distance from the first structure, the method comprising:

receiving, by a thermal switch, a signal;

actuating an electric motor in response to receiving the signal; and

linearly translating, using the electric motor, a first thermally conductive member into a position adjacent to a second thermally conductive member, the first and second thermally conductive member being in thermally conductive contact with the first and second structure, respectively.

2. The method of claim **1** wherein the linearly translating comprises linearly translating the first thermally conductive member adjacent to the second member to facilitate a selected radiative thermal transfer rate between the first and second structure via the first and second thermally conductive member.

3. The method of claim **2** wherein the positioning of the first thermally conductive member further causes an end region of the first thermally conductive member to make physical contact with either the second thermally conductive member or a third thermally conductive member attached to the second structure thereby facilitating a thermally conductive transfer between the first and second structure in addition to the radiative thermal transfer.

4. The method of claim **2** further comprising adjusting the position of the first thermally conductive member to either increase or decrease the selected rate of radiative thermal transfer between the first and second structure.

5. The method of claim **1** wherein the adjacent positioning of the first and second thermally conductive member causes a portion of a surface area of the first thermally conductive member to make physical contact with the second thermally conductive member thereby closing a thermally conductive path between the first and second structure.

6. A method of controlling thermal transfer between a first structure and a second structure comprising:

receiving, by a thermal switch, a signal; and

responding by the switch to the signal, by moving a translating plate into a position adjacent to a second thermally conductive member, the translating plate and the second thermally conductive member being in thermally conductive contact with the first and second structure, respectively;

wherein the thermal switch causes the movement of the translating plate by activating a gear-driven electric motor of the thermal switch which in turn translates a rotational motive force into a linear motion of the translating plate by acting on a plurality of gear teeth of the translating plate.

7. A thermal switch for transferring thermal energy between a first structure and a second structure comprising:

a casing comprising a travel slot and an opening aligned with the travel slot, the casing adapted to be attached to the first structure;

a thermally conductive member disposed at least partially within the travel slot; and

an electric motor disposed within the casing and adapted to provide a motive force to the thermally conductive member such that, when actuated, the electric motor moves the thermally conductive member along the travel slot and extends the thermally conductive member for at least a pre-determined length out of the opening of the casing, for thermal coupling with the second structure.

8. The thermal switch of claim **7** wherein the thermally conductive member comprises a translating plate having an end section adapted to fit into, and make physical contact with, a corresponding section of a contact plate attached to the second structure.

9. The thermal switch of claim **7** wherein the actuator is an electric solenoid actuator device.

10. The thermal switch of claim **7** wherein the thermally conductive member is coupled to the casing via a thermally conductive and flexible ribbon or wire.

11. A thermal switch for transferring thermal energy between a first structure and a second structure comprising:

a casing comprising a travel slot and an opening aligned with the travel slot, the casing adapted to be attached to the first structure;

a translating plate disposed at least partially within the travel slot, the translating plate having an end section adapted to fit into, and make physical contact with, a corresponding section of a contact plate attached to the second structure, the translating plate having a plurality of gear teeth; and

a gear-driven electric motor disposed within the casing and having a plurality of teeth corresponding to and adapted to fit with the plurality of gear teeth of the translating plate such that a rotational motive force of the gear-driven electric motor can be translated into a linear motion of the translating plate by an action of the plurality of teeth of the gear-driven electric motor against the plurality of gear teeth, the gear-driven electric motor being adapted to provide a motive force to the translating plate such that, when actuated, the gear-driven electric motor moves the translating plate along the travel slot and extends the translating plate for at least a pre-determined length out of the opening of the casing, for thermal coupling with the second structure.

12. A thermal switch for transferring thermal energy between a first structure and a second structure comprising:

a cover comprising an opening and adapted to be attached to the first structure;

an electric motor disposed within the cover;

at least one thermally conductive translating member operatively coupled to the electric motor and adapted to be translated by the electric motor to a selected one of a plurality of positions, and

when translated to a selected one of said positions, extendable at least partially out of the opening of the cover toward at least one thermally conductive fixed member that is thermal-conductively coupled to the second structure thereby facilitating a radiative thermal transfer between the first and second structure.

13. The thermal switch of claim **12** wherein the at least one thermally conductive translating member is a translating plate and the at least one fixed member is a fixed plate.

14. The thermal switch of claim **13** wherein the at least one translating plate is further adapted to be translatable so that it contacts a thermally conductive stop attached to the second structure, thereby facilitating a conductive thermal transfer between the first and second thermally conductive structure in addition to the radiative thermal transfer.

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